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The Gulf of Tonkin Incident, 40 Years Later

Flawed Intelligence and the Decision for War in Vietnam



[Photograph](#) taken from *USS Maddox* (DD-731) during her engagement with three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, 2 August 1964.



[Oil on canvas](#) by Commander E.J. Fitzgerald, January 1965. It depicts the engagement between *USS Maddox* (DD-731) and three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats on 2 August 1964.

**Signals Intercepts, Cited at Time, Prove Only August 2nd Battle, Not August 4;
Purported Second Attack Prompted Congressional Blank Check for War**

**Johnson-McNamara Tapes Show Readiness to Escalate, Even on Suspect Intel;
Top Aides Knew of Mistaken Signals, but Welcomed Justification for Vote**

National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 132

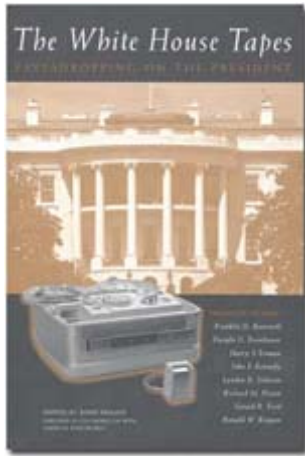
Edited by John Prados
Phone: 202/994-7000

Posted August 4, 2004

**Update -
December
1, 2005**
[Tonkin Gulf Intelligence "Skewed" According to Official History and Intercepts](#)

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Washington, D.C., 4 August 2004 - Forty years ago today, President Johnson and top U.S. officials chose to believe that North Vietnam had just attacked U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, even though the highly classified signals intercepts they cited to each other actually described a naval clash two days earlier (a battle prompted by covert U.S. attacks on North Vietnam), according to the declassified intercepts, Johnson White House tapes, and related documents posted today by the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

Compiled by Archive senior fellow and Vietnam expert John Prados, today's 40th anniversary electronic briefing book includes Dr. Prados's detailed analysis of the intercepts - only declassified in 2003 - together with audio files and transcripts of the key Tonkin Gulf conversations between President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. The latter are excerpted from Dr. Prados's book, *The White House Tapes* (New York: The New Press, 2003). The posting also contains photographs and charts from the Tonkin Gulf incident courtesy of the U.S. Naval Historical Center, a detailed documentary chronology compiled by the State Department's Office of the Historian for the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, a CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate on possible North Vietnamese responses to U.S. actions from May 1964 (just declassified in June 2004), and links to previous and upcoming Archive publications on Vietnam.

For more information, contact Dr. John Prados or Archive director Thomas Blanton at 202/994-7000.

[Essay: 40th Anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident](#)

by John Prados

[Gulf of Tonkin Signals Intercepts](#)

Source: LBJ Library: LBJF: NSF: CFVN, b. 77, f, "3A(3) Gulf of Tonkin, 8/64."

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[CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate on possible North Vietnamese responses to U.S. actions, May 1964](#)

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[Memorandum for the Record of White House Staff Meeting, Washington, August](#)

**Gulf of Tonkin's
Phantom Attack**

**U.S. Naval Historical
Center Image
Library - USS
Maddox: Actions in
the Gulf of Tonkin,
August 1964**

5, 1964, 8 a.m.

Source: Source: National Defense University, Taylor Papers, T-202-69. Secret; Eyes Only. Drafted by William Y. Smith.

Update - December 1, 2005

**Tonkin Gulf Intelligence "Skewed"
According to Official History and
Intercepts**

**Newly Declassified National Security Agency Documents
Show Analysts Made "SIGINT fit the claim" of North
Vietnamese Attack**

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